

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Oct. 19, 2005

For More Information Contact

VDH 05-30

James Farrell, Division of Immunization Director (804) 864-8055

Laura Ann Nicolai, Division Epidemiologist (804) 864-8055

**SENIORS URGED TO PROTECT THEMSELVES AGAINST
PNEUMOCOCCAL DISEASE**

(RICHMOND, Va.)—The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) is encouraging all seniors 65 years and older to get vaccinated against pneumococcal disease. This serious disease can lead to infections of the lungs (pneumonia), the blood (bacteremia), and the covering of the brain (meningitis). Each year pneumococcal disease causes thousands of hospitalizations and deaths.

“Pneumonia and influenza account for more than 2,000 deaths each year in Virginia, with nine out of 10 deaths occurring in seniors,” said State Health Commissioner Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H. “The pneumonia and influenza shots are quick, easy and relatively painless. They can help prevent serious illness and even death.”

Individuals can receive the pneumococcal vaccine any time during the year, but unvaccinated seniors are encouraged to get vaccinated before the winter months when respiratory diseases are more common. The vaccine is available from most physicians, local health departments and many local pharmacies.

The bacteria that cause pneumococcal infections are spread from person to person, mainly through the air. The disease can be spread by anyone who is infected, even if they don't have symptoms. Pneumococcal infections may develop as secondary infections after an initial viral illness, such as influenza.

There are various types of pneumonia. However, pneumococcal pneumonia causes about 175,000 hospitalizations each year in the United States and about five percent of people who get pneumococcal pneumonia die from it.

More than 50,000 cases of pneumococcal disease result in bacteremia, a blood infection. The overall death rate due to bacteremia is about 20 percent, but may be as high as 60 percent in elderly patients. Several thousand cases of pneumococcal meningitis occur each year. While about 30 percent of all pneumococcal meningitis cases result in death, the rate may be as high as 80 percent among seniors. Nearly all deaths occur in adults for whom vaccination against pneumococcal disease is recommended.

The pneumococcal vaccine is readily available and highly effective, yet in 2004 only 64.5 percent of seniors reported ever having received the vaccine. The vaccine becomes effective against pneumococcal bacteria within two to three weeks after the shot is given. Most adults age 65 years or older only need to be vaccinated once in a lifetime. However, for adults who are vaccinated before age 65, or for those at highest risk for serious disease, revaccination may be necessary.

(more)

Page Two
Pneumococcal Vaccine

The following people should receive the pneumococcal vaccine:

- All adults 65 years of age and older
- Anyone 2 years of age or older who has a long-term health problem, such as heart disease, lung disease, sickle cell disease, diabetes or alcoholism
- Anyone 2 years of age or older who has a disease or condition that lowers the body's resistance to infection, such as HIV or leukemia, or anyone who is taking an immunosuppressive drug, such as certain cancer treatments
- Residents of long-term care facilities

For more information about pneumococcal disease or the vaccine, contact your local health department or visit the VDH Web site at www.vdh.virginia.gov.

###